



I-17 commuters to see orange for some time

Construction to take two years to complete

by Brian DiTullio

NORTH VALLEY – If you’ve seen the concrete barriers, orange warning signs and reduced speed limits on I-17 between Happy Valley Road and Carefree Highway, get used to it. You’ve got about two years worth of construction to drive through – slowly.

Two representatives of the Arizona Department of Transportation recently sat down with The Desert Advocate to discuss the growing construction zones on I-17 north of the Loop 101. In the last several weeks, construction areas have been set up to facilitate the creation of four new traffic interchanges—for Jomax Road, Dixileta Drive, Lone Mountain Road and Dove Valley Road—as well as improvements to the Happy Valley Road and Carefree Highway interchanges.

ADOT Senior Resident Engineer Madhu Reddy said the lower speed limits were put in place a week before equipment started showing up for a good reason: “We wanted drivers to get used to slowing down in that area.”

Added media relations specialist Diane D’Angelo, “It’s human nature that people don’t pay attention to stuff until they’re in the middle of it.”

Reddy admits ADOT has received several complaints from drivers about the lower speed limits despite no crews working,

but said it's necessary to get motorists thinking about the construction that will be going on for the next few years. Reddy noted, however, he's working on getting the speed limit raised from 45 mph to 50 mph after evaluating the situation.

New interchanges aren't the only construction coming to I-17. Two lanes both north- and southbound will be added between Loop 101 and Carefree Highway, and final approval is expected soon to add one lane in each direction from Carefree Highway to Anthem Way. The widening of I-17 between Anthem Way and New River Road is in the planning stages.

The four new interchanges are for east-west roadways that do not yet intersect with I-17. However, in cooperation with the City of Phoenix, Jomax Road will be in existence by the time that interchange project is completed, according to Madhu. Dixileta Drive in the I-17 corridor initially will serve only as access to an APS transfer station, but the infrastructure will then be in place for future expansion to meet growing population needs, he added.

Projects up to Carefree Highway are expected to be completed in 2009, with the widening to Anthem Way concluding in 2010.

During construction, ADOT plans to keep two lanes open in each direction, although shoulders may not be available. The transportation department says, however, the freeway may need to be closed for "up to 15 minutes at a time" to complete some work, but these closures should occur only during nighttime hours.

In the meantime, D'Angelo suggests people who use I-17 plan ahead, especially on the weekends.

"If possible, leave Thursday, or by 10 a.m. on Friday," she said, noting the northbound lanes out of the city become quite clogged with people leaving town on Friday and Saturday mornings.

In a related matter, ADOT recently began conducting public meetings to explore the possibility of a future alternate highway to relieve congestion on I-17.

For commuters, Reddy advises using the tools available to everyone—the radio, Internet and television traffic reports—before leaving home. And once you're on the road, pay attention to the ADOT signs.

“Read the message boards,” Reddy said. “We have a super-visor who checks them twice a day.”

ADOT reminds drivers the slower speed limits are imposed to help ensure worker safety. And speeding in construction zones carries hefty fines.

“Highway work is some of the most dangerous work,” D’Angelo emphasized.

To help with traffic should a lane closure be needed, Reddy said Department of Public Safety officers will be present at construction sites.

In case of a vehicle breakdown, Reddy advises that motorists should try to get off the roadway as quickly as possible to avoid backing up traffic.

According to ADOT, most work on the I-17 project will be done overnight, between 10 p.m. and 5 a.m., to minimize the impact on rush-hour traffic.

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25 Easy Street PO Box 1380 | Carefree, AZ 85377

480.488.1204 | 480.488.6248 Fax